DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 184 669 PS 011 285

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TITLE Nursery Annexes and Parent Involvement in Hillfields, Coventry, England.
PUB DATE Nov 79
NOTE 12p.: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (Atlanta, GA, November 8-11, 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Disadvantaged: Foreign Countries: *Innovation: Minority Groups: *Paraprofessional School Personnel: Parent Education: *Parent Participation: Parent School Relationship: Preschool Education: *Program Implementation: Training
IDENTIFIERS *England (Coventry)

ABSTRACT

This paper tells the story of the implementation of the first inner city Community Education Project in the disadvantaged Hillfields area of Coventry, England. The population of the "ghetto-like" Hillfields, numbering 20,000, was made up largely of families from Asia with small groups from the West Indies, Ireland and Europe. A survey revealed that whereas there was only one preschool facility in the area, there were as many preschool-aged children (0-4.5 years) in the Hillfields area as there were children aged 5-16. An informal training program emphasizing "hands on" experiences was established to train mothers as paraprofessionals to staff planned annexes in the area to supplement the Nursery. Trained paraprofessionals were given supervised practice in a mobile preschool annex, a standard English double-decker bus which had been converted into a classroom and equipped with toys, picture books, sand and water trays, curtains and a toilet. When a need for a preschool became apparent at a location, suitable premises were sought and the bus moved on. Parents were encouraged to stay with their children at the preschools and many activities for parents, such as adult education classes, a fathers' group, telephone networks, and cultural awareness programs, were established. Compared with 1971, six times as many children now receive a half-time place in nursery school. (Author/RH)

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# NURSERY ANNEXES AND PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN HILLFIELDS

## COVENTRY, ENGLAND

Paper presented at the NAEYC National Convention in Atlanta
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PS011285

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Research in England as with the United States over the last few years has underlined again and again the importance of home-school links and the need to recognize the education of children as a joint process between parents and teachers. Barriers need to be broken down between school and home. To aid the process a wide range of strategies was employed by the educators in Coventry, England to encourage parents to feel welcome in the school, to give them confidence to articulate their worries about their children's education, and to bring about the realization that they were the major single influence upon their children's educational achievements.

In 1971, the Local Authority of Coventry* established the first Community Education Project in the inner city Hillfields area with four major aims in mind:

1. to increase the capacity of relevant services in the area by providing help which would be more acceptable, intelligible and lasting in its effects.
2. to help disadvantaged people find ways of meeting their own needs and aspirations.
3. to help people exercise control over their own lives.
4. to help enlarge the opportunities of the disadvantaged people in directions which they themselves could see as desirable.

Hillfields was a disadvantaged area close to the city center of Coventry and was fairly typical of inner city ring areas of most English cities. Being one of the oldest original areas, it was suffering the problems of creeping decay in the midst of redevelopment and improvement. It was cut off from the city center by a modern elevated ring road. Most of the new buildings were high rise apartments sur-

* School Board

rounded by rows of tenement houses. The population of about 20,000 was made up largely of families from Asia with a small scattering of groups from the West Indies, Ireland, and Europe. The whole area had something of a "ghetto-like" appearance and reputation. A survey by the Community Education Project Committee of the Local Authority of Coventry revealed that a disproportionate number of pre-school age children lived in the area. There were as many children aged 0-4½ in the area as there were children aged 5-16 and only one facility for pre-school with a capacity for 100 children.

Up until recently the Hillfields Nursery Center had been unique--being a combination nursery school and day-care center. It was staffed by both teachers and nursery nurses working under a head teacher (principal) and was open from 7 A.M.-6 P.M. Monday through Saturday for 49 weeks a year. All the staff worked shifts. However, the major problem was that for every child with a place in the Center, five others were on the waiting list and many more mothers, it was known, had not even bothered to forward their child's name because of the known shortage of places.

It was decided that there were buildings available in the Hillfields area that could be easily adapted into a pre-school and the committee felt, more importantly, that there were enough young mothers in the area who, although suffering the effects of multiple deprivation themselves, had

abilities not being used. There were also professional workers in the area with the expertise to train these mothers to develop the skills necessary to make use of these abilities. Thus developed the concept of a "Playbus" for a "hands-on" training program.

A training program was established to provide para-professionals to staff annexes in the area to supplement the Hillfields nursery. Two extremely qualified teachers, Mrs. Margaret Johnson, head teacher of the Nursery Center, and Mrs. Margaret Atkins were responsible for the training program. It was aimed at as much informality as possible. Working with women who had usually the minimum number of years of formal education, they felt that it would be inappropriate to replicate the methods of formal adult education classes. Therefore a course was designed for a minimum of 12 sessions, each of a half day's duration. In addition, the mothers were encouraged to spend as much time as possible alongside the teachers and nursery nurses in the Center itself. Instead of lectures about reading readiness skills, water play, show and tell activities, etc., the mothers experienced these things "first hand" and had the opportunity to observe children engaged in them under skilled supervision.

After the twelve training sessions, the first few months of real experience was spent on the "Playbus" or mobile training annex under the training eye of Margaret Atkins.

This was a standard English double-decker bus which had had the seats removed and had been converted into a bright and cheerful pre-school mobile annex equipped with toys, picture books, sand and water trays, curtains and soft seating and even its own toliet. This bus was set up in an area where a large number of young children lived but where there was no pre-school provision. It was driven to the same site each day and the training mothers learned by experience about running a nursery annex. Then when a real need in a particular part of the neighborhood had been shown by the use of the playbus, suitable premises were sought in the vicinity and the bus moved on to a new area of need. The first two annexes were established this way and staffed by a leader and two assistants all of whom had been through the training program. To allow for a slow and steady build-up of children and confidence, there was a four-month gap between the opening of Annex One and the opening of Annex Two. The Community Education Committee and the two training teachers hoped to continue in this way until six annexes would be opened in all and the Local Authority would take over the financial reponsibility for all of them, including the payment of the leaders in the annexes. (Prior to this time, the government had subsidized the project.)

In addition to the Playbus" concept, the teachers at Hillfields had long recognized the need for positive interaction between them and the parents of the children. As a

result, they developed some outstanding parent and community involvement as unique and inspiring as their mobile training annexes.

The teachers and nursery nurses encouraged their parents to bring their children to school and to stay with them as long as possible, to see to their adjustment and for the value itself of seeing their children interact with other children, observe the teaching model, and be an intragal part of the program itself. Knowing that some parents could not bring their children to school and/or stay with them, a genuine understanding prevailed and parents were not made to feel guilty. This was a very important first step toward parent involvement.

All types of activities, both during the day and in the evening for working parents, were established. Some of these activities were for individuals and some for parents as a group. Examples:

1. A separate Parents' Room was established within the school for parents to get together with other parents, by themselves or with staff members. This room contained resource material, professional books, parent books and magazines etc. which parents could refer to or browse through.

2. A policy was developed where parents were allowed and encouraged to eat lunch with their children at school, to organize family outings, establish family evenings and develop recreational outlets at the school for the community.

3. Another program was established for the participation of parents for their own development, without their children, during school time and/or evenings and on Saturdays. This program included adult education classes using the parents themselves as the teachers depending on their specific hobbies and skills. Some of the programs going on while I visited Hillfields were: arts and craft classes in needlepoint and crewel, a consumer buying class, a cost effective budget class, a sewing class, a typing class, and an "English as a Second Language" class.

4. Also at Hillfields, a fathers' group was established. The fathers met once a month at a local pub to exchange banter on sports etc. These meetings eventually turned into discussions on kids, common problems, and later to helping with the building of playground equipment and extras for the nursery centers themselves.

5. Another activity that the Hillfields' parents took on was the establishment of an effective means of communications between the home and school. They developed a phone calling network, a newsletter, did mailing assistance for the "head" and teachers, and made posters and advertisements for the community.

6. Some active parents began displays of the parents' groups' work and the children's work throughout the community, changing it from time to time. This developed a positive link with the community and pride in the local area

and its people and their accomplishments.

7. Because of the mixture of ethnic and cultural groups in Hillfields, parents saw a need to develop cultural awareness activities for promoting acceptance and understanding. Special programs reflecting cultural customs, religious and ethnic events were presented to educate the community. These programs consisted of displays of dances, varieties of costumes and dress, and types of foods typical of a particular group or holiday. These foods were served at the family dinners at school or at the community recreation programs. Always, the entire community was welcome at school and parents' activities.

8. Mothers also cooperated with teachers and set up morning coffees (the British set aside a specific time in the morning and the afternoon for their morning coffee and afternoon tea!), open classroom visitation weeks for the entire community, assemblies for the children, workshops for instruction for parents, social service workshops, and peer counseling sessions. In the latter three areas, parents were hepled in developing materials to use with their children at home, learning types of suitable and appropriate toys and materials to buy and use with their children, and learning to develop and evaluate their own skills and also the skills of their children.

Hillfields Nursery Center's emphasis on parent involvement and the many steps they took toward achieving their goals have been very successful and could therefore be seen as a

fitting example for any pre-school program--especially those in "depressed" areas and/or multi-cultural settings.

What does all this mean to the Hillfields area and to Coventry itself? First, six times as many children are now receiving a half-time place in nursery school than there were in 1971. These children are receiving valuable social and educational guidance from an early age. Secondly, a small but growing number of mothers in the area are being enabled to use their abilities to give something to the community and to their children in a skilled and important way. Thirdly, the influence of a thriving nursery center is being spread across the area by being able to offer flexible nursery provision in different settings as it is needed.

There are other incidental but less tangible or direct benefits gained from this experience and experiment. A feeling of dignity is being generated by the knowledge among local residents that they are doing things for themselves. Unused or underused buildings are being turned into lively and useful places and for the first time are helping to generate a feeling of rejuvenation in the area. There now also exists a group of people who are enjoying something they did not have before and feeling a benefit from it.

But perhaps the most important benefits of all are:

1. The experiment of training mothers to be involved in the education and provisions of their children is successful.

2. The concept of the "Playbus" as an extra nursery as well as a "trial-run" financially is also a success and a reality as populations grow and wane.

3. The use of a total parent (both fathers and mothers) involvement program with an entire community emphasis is possible.

4. The basis of a multi-cultural acceptance and understanding is being fostered with willingness and success by an entire community.

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